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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
9 May 1985

2 months of hope dashed by 2 acrimonious speeches

By James McCartney
Inquirer Washington Bureau

Analysis

WASHINGTON — The diplomatic honeymoon ended yesterday for Ronald Reagan and Mikhail S. Gorbachov. It lasted just eight weeks.

The unmistakable signal came in two toughly worded speeches — one by Reagan in Strasbourg, France, the other by Gorbachov in Moscow — that marked the close of a brief era of widespread optimism about prospects for improving U.S.-Soviet relations.

Unwilling to yield on major differences, these leaders, who have never met, began pouring out their troubles with each other to Western Europe, where each hopes to gain sympathetic ears and put pressure on the other.

For Reagan, the major grievance was a new Soviet land-based missile, the SS-X-24, which U.S. intelligence officials have known about for two years. Reagan charged it was "clearly designed to strike first."

It was unclear exactly why Reagan chose to make this missile a critical issue, because military analysts say warheads on the SS-X-24 will be no more powerful than about 3,000 warheads the Soviets already have on SS-18 missiles.

Gorbachov's attack on the United States came in the form of a broadside.

"American imperialism," he said, "is at the forward edge of the war menace to mankind. The policy of the U.S.A. is growing more bellicose in character and has become a constant negative factor of international relations."

Despite the tough words, there was no immediate prospect of a total breakup in relations, according to high-level American officials, who said a Reagan-Gorbachov meeting is still a virtual certainty, probably in New York soon after the United Nations opens its fall session.

When Gorbachov was named Soviet leader eight weeks ago, it touched off worldwide speculation that a younger, more sophisticated Soviet leadership might hold promise for relaxation of tensions.

But officials of both East and West note that, beneath the initial conciliatory words, neither Reagan nor Gorbachov was willing to change positions on issues that have divided the two countries and led to tense relations.

Instead, the first round in a new set of arms control talks in Geneva came and went with no progress on any of the outstanding issues.

The speeches yesterday, State Department specialists on the Soviet Union say, symbolized the frustrations of the Geneva deadlock and the apparent determination of each side to blame problems in the Geneva negotiations on the other.

A White House official also cited frustrations over the shooting death in March of an U.S. Army major by a Soviet soldier in East Germany.

"I think the two leaders are sparring with one another," one high-level official said. "It's a kind of preliminary public posturing" on each side, he said, in an effort to court European public opinion, in particular, on the issue of who is to blame for continuing tensions.

U.S. officials believe that Gorbachov's strategy in the use of harsh language represents a continuing Soviet effort to split the United States from its European allies.

They predict that the Soviets will continue this propaganda effort in months ahead to try to appeal to the European peace movement. A specific objective, they say, is to try to get Europeans to put pressure on the United States to call off Reagan's anti-missile defense research program, known as "Star Wars."

They say the Soviets are unlikely to make concessions in the Geneva arms talks unless they become convinced that their propaganda campaign has failed.

Reagan's tough language regarding the SS-X-24 was apparently watered down somewhat from even stronger language in drafts prepared two weeks ago.

One State Department official said he was pleased with the final Reagan speech because it was relatively conciliatory compared to first drafts.

Reagan repeated earlier invitations to the Soviets to lessen tensions by improving communications and by devising rules to prevent a repetition of incidents like the March 25 shooting death of the U.S. military observer.

He also expressed hope that the two countries could eventually eliminate all nuclear arms, a hope Gorbachov also expressed in his speech yesterday.

"The speech had an olive branch as well as a sword," a State Department official said. "It was a mixture."

That apparently represented a compromise between Robert C. McFarlane, national security adviser, and Patrick J. Buchanan, communications director. Buchanan reportedly had argued for a strongly anti-Soviet speech, McFarlane for a more statesmanlike approach. Each apparently got a little of what he wanted.

The longtime Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly F. Dobrynin, was asked yesterday at an embassy reception whether he thought the tough wording of the Reagan and Gorbachov speeches meant that efforts to improve relations were falling apart.

"I've been waiting for 21 years for improved relations," Dobrynin said. "There is always hope, but how that will be translated, I don't know."